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Schraube, Ernst

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Anders, Günther

By Ernst Schraube

Philosopher of technology, Günther Anders (1902-1992), who was born in the city of Breslau (then a part of Germany) on July 12, 1902, developed a unique moral critique of modern technology. He studied psychology, history of art, and philosophy at the universities of Hamburg and Berlin, and, as a student of Edmund Husserl, he received his PhD from the university of Freiburg in 1923. Anders's escape from Nazi-Germany in 1933, his life in North America as an exile, and, most importantly, the events of Auschwitz and Hiroshima formed the experiential background to his thoughts. He returned to Europe in 1950 and lived in Vienna for the rest of his life.

Anders's philosophy exemplifies that tradition of critical and enlightened thought which engages with the world and the concrete problems of its time, seeking to ground human actions and the necessity of morality and ethics from within actual historical conditions. Anders's extensive œuvre is primarily focused on an analysis of the changes to which human beings, both individually and collectively, are subject to in a technological world. But, particularly in the early stages of his work, he also undertook socio-political analyses of human practice (e.g., studies on fascism and unemployment), as well as producing poems, philosophical novels and other writings on philosophy, literature and art. Concern with the world is such a strong feature of Anders's philosophical identity that, for him, theoretical analysis and practical engagement are inextricably linked. He was one of the first intellectuals who warned against the Nazis and he took part in the resistance against Hitler and fascism. Later he was an active anti-Vietnam War protester, and he was an initiator of the anti-nuclear and environmental movements. But, as much as he was a political activist, he nonetheless recognized the vital role of theory in an

increasingly scientific and technological world, and, in reversing Marx's famous formulation, he emphasized: "It is not enough to change the world, we do this anyway. And it mostly happens without our efforts, regardless. What we have to do is to interpret these changes so we in turn can change the changes, so that the world doesn't go on changing without us — and does not ultimately become a world without us" (1980/2002, p. 5).

Anders regarded the destruction of Hiroshima as signaling the year zero of a new era and as the event which crystallized mankind's newly acquired capacity for self-destruction. This step into a future continually threatened with its own finality represents for him a radically new context for human action, demanding a new morality and a new ethics. Anders attempts to confront this changed global reality, and from here on he concentrates his efforts on thinking through the new moral situation and elucidating the relationship between human beings and technology.

He recognized that human activity, through its development of technology, had begun to overreach itself in a fatal way. Since human faculties such as emotionality, perception, or even the ability to assume responsibility are relatively circumscribed when compared to our capacity to create new things, we are now faced, he says, with a *Promethean discrepancy* between the world of technology and human's ability to visualize it; a divide primarily attributable both to the accelerated pace of technological development, and to the enormous complexity of the created things and their effects. In this paradoxical situation, whereby *we are smaller than ourselves*, Anders sees the basic dilemma of our time, a dilemma that can only be resolved by a *moral imagination* reconnecting production and visualization, creation and representation.

In his major work entitled *The Obsolescence of Human Beings*, Anders develops the project of such a *moral imagination* using a specific thing-cognizant approach. Since he realizes that acting has shifted (of course through human action) from the province of humans to the sphere of work and products, and that the

created things are not simply neutral means to an end, but in fact represent *incarnated* or *reified actions*, he places the question of morality primarily in the realm of the things themselves. Therefore, he is less concerned with listening to the voice of the heart (or examining the social processes of making or use), than with articulating the mute principles of work and the secret maxims of our products, and trying to imagine how these embedded precepts are changing human beings and the fabric of daily life. Anders's work constitutes a new form of practical reason that attempts to reconnect modern technology to its human origins. "Have only those things," he formulates as today's imperative, "whose inherent action maxims could become maxims for your own actions" (1956/2002, p. 298).

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